

## How to Justify Violence

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Mahatma Gandhi has had a profound influence on my life. I think it is fair to say that I would never have become an animal rights advocate if I had not read his autobiography.<sup>1</sup> Learning about his life changed mine. Gandhi helped me see that cows and pigs, not just cats and dogs, are unique somebodies, not disposable somethings. Voiceless somebodies. Vulnerable somebodies. Innocent somebodies. Gandhi made me feel deeply responsible for how we humans treat other creatures. If I did not assert their rights, if I remained neutral, who would speak for them? For the past 30 years and more, speaking for them has been a large part of my being in the world.

Pacifism is one place Gandhi went where I never have been able to go. He teaches that the use of violence is always wrong, even in defense of those who have done no wrong, those who are innocent. I think I understand this way of thinking. It is at least as old as Jesus' injunction to "turn the other cheek" if someone smites thee.

Maybe it's my blue-collar background, but I have always believed that anyone who smites me (or my wife or our children, for example) is looking for trouble. Depending on the circumstances (the attacker is not carrying a gun, for example) I hope I would have the courage to do some serious smiting back.

If my experience has taught me anything, it is that I am not the exception. I am the rule. Throughout my life I have met very few people (I could count them all with the fingers on one hand) who think differently. *Sometimes*, in *some* circumstances, violence is justified. That's what the rest of us believe. Where we sometimes part company is over the question, "In what circumstances?"

My answer sets forth three conditions.<sup>2</sup> First, the violence employed is used to defend the innocent. Second, nonviolent alternatives have been exhausted, as time and circumstances permit. Third, the violence

used is not excessive; in other words, the amount or kind of violence employed is not more than is needed to achieve the desired objective: the defense of the innocent. Here is an example that illustrates how things can go wrong.

Suppose an estranged father kidnaps his children and threatens to kill them if the police try to rescue them. Clearly, the children are innocent, so one of the conditions is satisfied. However, if the police shoot the father before negotiating with him, their use of violence would be unjustified in my view. In their haste, they did not take the time to exhaust nonviolent alternatives. Further, if the police used lethal force when another method would have sufficed (tear gas, say), that would be wrong, too. The amount of violence used was excessive.

My judgment is different, given different circumstances. If the police have every reason to believe that the father intends to kill his children, if they patiently negotiated in good faith, and if no less violent means would succeed in rescuing the children, then, in my view, the police would be justified in using lethal force.

Is my view “crazy,” “weird,” “irrational,” “extreme”? I don’t think so. Except for Gandhian pacifists, I think the rest of humanity is on my side. None of us endorses the use of violence for frivolous reasons. Or a policy of shooting first and asking questions later. Or using more violence when less will do. We all understand that we can justify using violence some of the time without believing that its use is justified all of the time.

My view (our view, I dare say) is directly relevant to the central question at the heart of some forms of animal rights advocacy. This question asks, “Is the use of violence in defense of animals ever justified?”

Some animal rights advocates (ARAs) dismiss this question because of how they understand the meaning of “violence.” In their perspective, violence is restricted to causing physical harm to a sentient being, human or otherwise. Given this usage, the police used violence when they shot the estranged father. The same is true when rapists assault their victims or when bombs are dropped on people during a war. But if no harm is caused to anyone, then, no matter what people do, no violence is done.<sup>3</sup>

I personally disagree with ARAs who think this way, and I am not alone. Ask any member of the general public whether firebombing an empty synagogue involves violence. Ask any lawyer whether arson is a violent crime (whether or not anyone is hurt). The response is overwhelmingly likely to be, “Am I missing something? *Of course* these

acts are violent.” The plain fact is, our language is not tortured or stretched when we speak of the “violent destruction of property.” The plain fact is, we do not need to hurt someone in order to do violence to some thing.

Gandhi agrees. “Sabotage [destroying property for political purposes, without hurting anyone in the process] is a form of violence,” he writes, adding, “People have realized the futility of physical violence but some people apparently think it [that is, violence] may be successfully practiced in its modified form as sabotage.”<sup>4</sup> Gandhi does not count himself among those who think this way.

Martin Luther King, Jr. sees things the same way. Among the many relevant examples: In March of 1968, shortly before his death, King was leading a march in Memphis on behalf of the city’s sanitation workers. “At the back of the line,” King’s biographer, Stephen B. Oates, observes, “black teenagers were smashing windows and looting stores. . . . King signaled to [James] Lawson [the local march coordinator] . . . ‘I will never lead a violent march,’ King said, ‘so please call it off.’ While Lawson yelled in his bullhorn for everybody to return to the church, King . . . climbed into a car [and sped away].”<sup>5</sup> No one was hurt that day in Memphis, but some serious violence was done.

ARAs who think that arson and other forms of destruction of property are forms of “nonviolent direct action” are free to think what they will. Certainly nothing I say can make them change their minds. I will only observe that, in my opinion, unless or until these advocates accept the fact that some ARAs use violence in the name of animal rights (for example, when they firebomb empty research labs), the general public will turn a deaf ear when their spokespersons attempt to justify such actions.

So the real question, I believe, is not whether some ARAs use violence. The real question is whether they are justified in doing so. Here are the main outlines of a possible justification.

1. Animals are innocent.
2. Violence is used only when it is necessary to rescue them so that they are spared terrible harms.
3. Excessive violence is never used.
4. Violence is used only after nonviolent alternatives have been exhausted, as time and circumstances permit.
5. Therefore, in these cases, the use of violence is justified.

What should we say in response to this line of reasoning? If all the

premises (1 through 4) are true, how can we avoid agreeing with the conclusion (5)? True, Gandhian pacifists can avoid the conclusion; they do not accept any violence, even in defense of the innocent. However, most of us are not Gandhian pacifists; for us, the plot thickens.

Personally, I don't think the second premise is true of all or even most of the violence done in the name of animal rights. Why not? Because the vast majority of this violence does not involve animal rescue. The vast majority (I estimate 98 percent) is property destruction, pure and simple. In cases like these, the defense we are considering contributes nothing by way of justification.

What of the remaining two percent of cases, cases where violence is used and animals are rescued? For example, suppose a multi-million dollar lab is burnt to the ground *after* the animals in it have been liberated. Would this kind of violence be justified, given the argument sketched above?

Again, I don't think so. And the reason I don't think so is that I don't think the requirement set forth in premise 4 has been satisfied. Personally, I do not think that ARAs in general, members of the ALF in particular, have done nearly enough when it comes to exhausting nonviolent alternatives. Granted, to do this will take time and will require great patience coupled with hard, dedicated work. Granted, the results of these labors are uncertain. And granted, animals will be suffering and dying every hour of every day that ARAs struggle to free them using nonviolent means. Nevertheless, unless or until ARAs have done the demanding nonviolent work that needs to be done, the use of violence, in my judgment, is not morally justified. (It is also a tactical disaster. Even when animals are rescued, the story the media tells is about the "terrorist" acts of ARAs, not the terrible things that were being done to animals. The one thing ARA violence never fails to produce is more grist for the mills run by spokespersons for the major animal user industries.)

ARAs who disagree with me are certainly free to argue that violence is justified under different conditions than those I have given. For example, they could argue that violence is justified when the damage caused is so extensive that it puts an animal abuser out of business. In this case, no animals are rescued but (so it may be argued) some animals are spared the horrors of vivisection in a lab or a lifetime of deprivation on a fur farm, for example. However, to consider such an argument is premature. Before it merits consideration, ARAs who support such actions need to acknowledge that these are violent acts, something that, as we have seen, these supporters are loath to admit.

The role of violence in social justice movements raises complicated questions that always have and always will divide activists on matters of substance, ethics, and strategy in particular. It need not divide ARAs when it comes to assessments of character. I know ARAs who have spent years in jail because they have broken the law, having used violence as I understand this idea. To a person, these activists believe ARAs already have exhausted nonviolent alternatives. To a person, they believe the time for talking has passed. To a person, they believe the time for acting has arrived.

I have never doubted the sincerity and commitment—or the courage—these activists embody. I am reminded of an observation (I cannot find the source) Gandhi once made, to the effect that he had more admiration for people who have the courage to use violence than he had for people who embraced nonviolence out of cowardice. So, yes, ARAs who use violence are courageous in their acts, and sincere in their commitment. And yes, perhaps some of us who reject the violence they employ do so out of cowardice. Nevertheless, violence done by ARAs, in my judgment, not only is wrong but hurts, rather than helps, the animal rights movement.

Before concluding, it is important to take note of how the story of "animal rights violence" gets told by the media. On the one side, we have the law-abiding people who work for the major animal user industries. On the other side, we have violent, law-breaking ARAs. Paragons of nonviolence versus beady-eyed flamethrowers. Not only is this absurdly unfair to ARAs, 99+ percent of whom do not participate in violent forms of activism, it is nothing less than a cover-up of the truth when it comes to what the major animal user industries do. The treatment animals receive in the name of scientific research illustrates my meaning.

Animals are drowned, suffocated, and starved to death; they have their limbs severed and their organs crushed; they are burned, exposed to radiation, and used in experimental surgeries; they are shocked, raised in isolation, exposed to weapons of mass destruction, and rendered blind or paralyzed; they are given heart attacks, ulcers, paralysis, and seizures; they are forced to inhale tobacco smoke, drink alcohol, and ingest various drugs, such as heroine and cocaine.

And they say ARAs are violent. The bitter truth would be laughable if it were not so tragic. The violence done to things by some ARAs (by which I mean the violent destruction of insensate property) is nothing compared to the violence done to feeling creatures by the major animal user industries. A raindrop compared to an ocean. On a day-to-day

basis, by far the greatest amount of violence done in the “civilized” world occurs because of what humans do to other animals. That the violence is legally protected, that in some cases (for example, vivisection) it is socially esteemed, only serves to make matters worse.

Finally, and lamentably, one thing seems certain. Unless the massive amount of violence done to animals is acknowledged by those who do it, and until meaningful steps are taken to end it, as certain as night follows day, some ARAs, somewhere, somehow, will use violence against animal abusers themselves to defend the rights of animals.<sup>6</sup>

### Notes

1. Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Autobiography: The Story of my Experiments with Truth* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965).
2. As I understand the issues, these three conditions represent the paradigm case of the justification for the use of violence. Additional conditions may be possible. My discussion of violence here is adapted from my discussion in *Empty Cages: Facing the Challenge of Animal Rights* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).
3. Thus do we find the Animal Liberation Front described as being involved in “a non-violent campaign, activists taking all precautions not to harm any animals (human or otherwise).” See [www.hedweb.com/alfa.htm](http://www.hedweb.com/alfa.htm).
4. Thomas Merton, ed., *Gandhi on Nonviolence* (New York: New Directions, 1965), 39.
5. Stephen B. Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 477.
6. For further elaboration on the future of violence by ARAs, see my “Understanding Animal Rights Violence,” in *Defending Animal Rights* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001).